

THE FIRE AND THE FARM.

The Last Recorded Adventure of Capt. Kettle.

WRITTEN FOR THE EVENING STAR BY CUTLIFFE HYNE.

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The quartermaster knocked smartly and came into the chart house, and Capt. Kettle's eyes snapped open from deep sleep to complete wakefulness.

"There's some sort of vessel on fire, sir, to leeward, about five miles off."

The shipmaster glanced up at the tell-tale compass above his head. "Officer of the watch has changed the course, I see. We're heading for it, eh?"

"Yes, sir. The second mate told me to."

"Right. Pass the word for the carpenter and tell him to get port and starboard lifeboats ready for lowering in case they're wanted. I'll be on the bridge in a minute."

"Aye, aye, sir," said the quartermaster, and withdrew into the darkness outside.

Kettle soon emerged attired in high rubber thigh boots and leather bound black stockings.

The night was black and thick with a drizzle of rain, and a heavy fog rolled through the Flamingo's rigging. The first mate and the third had already turned out, and were on the boatsides helping the carpenter as they picked up the outboard against the Flamingo's bows, saved with great swooping dives.

Kettle went on to the end of the bridge and peered ahead through the bridge binoculars. "A steamer," he commented, "and a big one, too, and she's finely ablaze. Not much help we shall be able to give. It will be case of taking her out of the way if they aren't already cooked before we get there." He looked over the side at the eddy of water that clung to the ship's flank. "I see you're showing her along," he said to the second mate.

"I sent word down to the engine room to give her all they knew the moment we saw the glow," thought you wouldn't grudge the coal, sir."

"No; quite right. Hope there aren't too many of them to be picked off, or we shall make a tight fit."

"Funny we should be carrying the biggest cargo the old boat ever had packed into her. They won't mind much where they come as long as they're picked up out of the water. Ber-ri!" shivered the second mate. "I shouldn't much fancy open-board cruising in the Western ocean this weather."

Capt. Kettle stared through the shiny brass binoculars. "Call all hands," he said, quietly. "That's a big ship ahead of us. God send she's only an old tramp. At those lifeboats, there!"

"Swing the davits outboard, and pass your painters forward. Hump yourselves, now."

"There's a lot of ice here, sir," came a grumbling voice out of the darkness, and the boats are frozen on to the chocks. We've got to hammer it away before they'll float."

"You call yourself a mate and hold a master's ticket, and want to get a ship on your own?" Kettle vaulted over the rail on the top of the davit, and held for his second in command—Here, my man, if you delicate fingers can't do this bit of a job, give me that marlinpike. By James! do you hear me? Give up that boat to me. Did you never see a boat leed up before? Now, then, carpenter. Are you worth your salt? Or am I to clear both ends in this boat by myself?"

So, by example and tongue, Capt. Kettle got his boats swung outboard, and the Flamingo, with her engines working at an unusual strain, started rapidly nearer and nearer to the blaze.

Wind, cold and breakdowns of machinery and sailor accepts with dull, leaden seas, a fear was beginning to grip the little shipmaster that was deep enough to cause him a physical nausea. The burning steamer ahead was a fire, and with people, and almost head-on toward them, keeping her stern to the sea, so that the wind could have no effect on the smoke. The smoke, however, became more apparent some one guessed her as a big cargo tramp from New Orleans, with cotton that had overheated and fired, and Kettle took command of the suggestion and tried to believe that it might come true.

But meanwhile as the Flamingo made her way upwind against the main sea, a fear was beginning to grip the little shipmaster that was deep enough to cause him a physical nausea. The burning steamer ahead was a fire, and with people, and almost head-on toward them, keeping her stern to the sea, so that the wind could have no effect on the smoke. The smoke, however, became more apparent some one guessed her as a big cargo tramp from New Orleans, with cotton that had overheated and fired, and Kettle took command of the suggestion and tried to believe that it might come true.

But as they closed with her, and came within earshot of her siren, which was sending frightened, useless blares across the churning waters, there was no being back. The Flamingo was a passenger liner, outward bound, too, and populous. And as they came still nearer they saw her afterdeck crowded with people, and Kettle got a glimpse of her structure and recognized the vessel herself.

The Grosser Carl, he muttered, "out of Hamburg for New York, third class, and she cuts rats for third and gets the bulk of the German emigrant traffic. She'll have 600 on her this minute, and too many to care for. Every living soul on board over yonder, and getting worse every minute. O, great James, I wonder what's going on. She's a big cargo tramp, twenty years old, and she's a piece of old iron. I'll bet them on the old Flam here, I'll bet 'em to busting."

He clapped the binoculars to his eyes and started a staring stare at the right of the night. If only he could catch a glimpse of some other liner hurrying along her route, then these people could be saved. But the Flamingo and the Grosser Carl had the stage severely to themselves, and between them, the making of an intolerable weight of destiny.

The second mate broke in upon his commander's brooding. "Shall I be getting the Grosser Carl's cargo on board?"

Kettle turned on him with a sudden fierceness. "Do you know you're asking me to ruin myself?"

"We've jettisoned cargo to make room for these poor beggars, sir, the insurance will pay."

"You've got to take care of that ship if you don't know any more than that about the responsibility for a wrecked vessel."

"By jove, that's awkward. Birds would look pretty blue if the bill was handed in to them."

"Birds," said Kettle, with contempt. "They're aren't liable for sixpence. Supposing you were traveling by train, and there was somebody else's portmanteau in the carriage, and you flung it out of the window into a river, would you suppose you'd have to stand the racket?"

"Why, me. But then, sir, this is different."

"Not a bit. If we start in to jettison cargo it means I'm a ruined man."

"We can't leave these poor devils," said the second mate, awkwardly.

"Of course we can't. They're an unclean pack, we should think ourselves too good to brush against them if we met them in the street, but sentiment demands that we stay and pull them by the hand, and cold necessity leaves me to foot the bill. You're young and not married, my lad. I'm neither. I've worked like a dog and only lately luck's turned a bit."

"Perhaps somebody else will pay for the things we have to jettison."

"It's pretty thin comfort when you've got a 'perish of that size, and no mortal other stop between you and the workhouse."

"It's all very well doing these things in hot blood, but the reckoning's paid when you're cold, and they're cold, and with the board of trade standing by like the devil in the background all ready to give you a kick when there's a spare place for a fresh fool."

He slammed down the handle of the bridge door and rang off the Flamingo's engines. He had been measuring distances all this time with his eye. "But, of course, there's the blessed cause of humanity to think of. We were traveling by train, and there was somebody else's portmanteau in the carriage, and you flung it out of the window into a river, would you suppose you'd have to stand the racket?"

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